Business battles the mighty geek

DIGITAL SURVIVOR

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Decades from now, people will characterize the early years of the 21st century as a period dominated by a battle between the corporate entertainment world and the computer geeks.

With all the recent merger frenzy, it's become obvious that the corporate types have finally clued in to the Internet, e-biz and e-commerce. Yet to their horror, they realize that while fabulous opportunities exist on-line, a Pandora's box of challenges has also emerged. In particular, it seems that they can no longer control the distribution of their products.

I'd hazard a guess that given the flurry of recent lawsuits, some media moguls have decided that the only way to deal with the Internet is to sue anyone and everyone who is challenging their business models.

The music industry has been busy suing various groups involved with MP3, the music format that makes it easy to distribute digital forms of music. The movie, television and entertainment industries are busy suing Toronto-based on-line broadcaster iCraveTV.com, charging it with "brazen theft."

> I don't know about you, but my money is on the geeks.

There are new lawsuits against computer geeks who have managed to figure out how to get around the copy protection scheme found on DVD-ROMs, which is arguably the hottest new entertainment technology on the planet.

Things are getting nasty: Just the other day, a 16-year-old Norwegian kid who figured out the mathematical equations behind the DVD code found the police banging at his door.

A battle royal is under way, and it's fascinating entertainment. On one side, we have the entertainment companies, finally ready to take advantage of the opportunities of the wired world, and ready to use lawyers to defend their turf.

On the other side, there's a ragtag army of computer geeks, bound by the global reach of the Internet, and impassioned by their collective distaste for anything that puts constraints on how they might use their computers.

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Regardless of the deep, troubling and complex issues at work here, the reality is that the folks who control the computer code will be the ones who will control the future. Any attempts to prevent the distribution of information by legal means in this digital world — whether it be music, movies or television signals — will ultimately be doomed to failure.

To understand why, you need to immerse yourself in the mindset of the technical community, instead of simply pondering the press releases from the other side.

One of the best starting points is to visit Slashdot (**http://slashdot.org**) — it uses the tag line "News For Nerds. Stuff that Matters." It's a geek perspective on the issues of the day, including the many legal battles. (Investors take note: It is probably also the best place to understand new technologies before they come out. The entire Slashdot community knew what Transmeta was up to before any public announcement was made.)

Often weird, slightly adolescent, extremely irreverent and often not understandable, it is still a goldmine of information as to how the Internet of the future will shape up.

There are countless other sites similar to SlashDot. Techdirt (**http://techdirt.com**) is but another example of these on-line communities.

You come to realize that all these lawsuits are viewed as nothing more than an amusing challenge to the geek community. The on-line mindset, when confronted by a legal letter or restrictive computer code, is to play a version of a popular quiz TV show. "I can crack that secret code in three steps, Alex," goes the response to the challenge.

Instant communities, such as OpenDVD (**http://www.opendvd.org/**), are emerging in which the geeks passionately defend their right to open up technology or share information — and where they counter the PR spin from the corporate or entertainment world. This community often acts in bad taste, poking fun at the futility of lawsuits in the digital age.

I just visited a Web site and bought a T-shirt that contains the entire secret DVD code printed on the back.

What chance does Hollywood have in this battle, when its crown jewels are protected by a mathematical equations that can be printed on the back of a T-shirt once the geek community has figured it out?

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